



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

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News Release

SOUTH BAY MAN PLEADS GUILTY TO SMUGGLING ALIENS AND TROPICAL FISH INTO UNITED STATES

LOS ANGELES – A San Pedro man faces up to 15 years in prison after pleading guilty today to federal charges related to smuggling both tropical fish and illegal aliens into the United States.

Craig Lightner, 42, pleaded guilty this morning to smuggling protected tropical fish and approximately 70 illegal aliens into the United States in separate incidents. The charges are the result of an investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and the United States Coast Guard.

“This case highlights what ICE has said all along, that smugglers are ruthless opportunists whose only purpose is making a profit,” said Loraine Brown, special agent-in-charge for ICE investigations in Los Angeles. “The criminal organization that traffics narcotics today could start smuggling people tomorrow. It boils down to whatever commodity will produce the biggest pay day, which is why dismantling smuggling enterprises like this is one of ICE's top enforcement priorities.”

Appearing before United States District Judge Gary A. Feess, Lightner specifically pleaded guilty to encouraging or inducing aliens to enter the United States for financial gain, a charge that carries a penalty of up to 10 years in federal prison. In plea agreements filed here today in United States District Court, Lightner admitted that he smuggled illegal aliens into the United States on two occasions in August 2004. Using two rented boats – the 47-foot yacht *Soul Mates* and the 44-foot yacht *C'est La Vie* – Lightner was involved in the smuggling of 20 and then 50 illegal immigrants who were transported from Tijuana to Ensenada and then to the Port of Los Angeles.

The alien smuggling scheme was discovered on August 30, 2004, when the *C'est La Vie* was stopped and boarded by the United States Coast Guard before approximately 50 aliens were off-loaded in the Port of Los Angeles. The interdiction of the rented French-built yacht by the U.S. Coast Guard represented the largest incident of maritime human smuggling in the Los Angeles area in recent years. The aliens, including a three-year-old boy and a woman in her final month of pregnancy, were crowded into the vessel's small cabin, which was designed to sleep eight people.

Two men who manned the *C'est La Vie* previously pleaded guilty to federal charges and will be sentenced later this year.

In the second case in which he pleaded guilty today, Lightner admitted that he smuggled rare and expensive tropical fish into the United States. The fish – Clarion Angelfish, which are indigenous to Mexico and can cost up to \$2,000 each – were smuggled into the country in May 2004 through Los Angeles International Airport. In this case, Lightner pleaded guilty to one count of smuggling the tropical fish into the U.S. without declaring them to federal authorities, a crime that carries a maximum possible penalty of five years in prison. Many of the angelfish smuggled into the U.S. were given to the Aquarium of the Pacific.

Lightner is scheduled to be sentenced by Judge Feess on December 5.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of five integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.